

Day Of The Dead

<http://www.cultureplanet.com/dayofdead.htm>

Many people's first introduction to Mexico's Day of the Dead (*Día de Los Muertos*) is through the colorful folk art associated with it. There are spring-necked, hand-painted ceramic skeletons of doctors, musicians, teachers, dentists, cops, and brides and grooms. Glass-enclosed wood boxes feature meticulously detailed and often humorous ensemble scenes. Sugar skulls are an ingredient for elaborate altars laid out in homes or at graves. All of these items are part of a holiday that takes place on All Soul's Day (November 2), or on both the first two days of the month.

Day of the Dead is a celebration of the dearly departed, a reunion of the entire extended family (living and dead), and a reminder that life and death are inextricably intertwined. The underlying belief is that the spirits of the dead return to the earth at this time to be with their families and loved ones. The holiday has much humor, as does modern Halloween, but is a much more thoughtful and emotional contemplation of life and mortality.

Day of the Dead has ancient roots, as does Halloween, and traces back to prehispanic festivities. It was co-opted by Spanish Catholic priests, who merged these "profane" rituals with their own holiday calendar. Journalist Dale Palfrey notes that Day of the Dead is "marked throughout Mexico by a plethora of intriguing customs that vary widely according to the ethnic roots of each region. Common to all, however, are colorful adornments and lively reunions at family burial plots, the preparation of special foods, offerings laid out for the departed on commemorative altars, and religious rites that are likely to include noisy fireworks."

For the festivities, markets and shops in Mexico sell skeletons and macabre toys, intricate tissue cut-outs (*papel picado*), elaborate wreaths and crosses decorated with paper or silk flowers, candles, votive lights and fresh seasonal flowers, plus skulls and coffins made of sugar and chocolate. All of these gifts are destined for the buyer's *ofrenda de muertos* (offering to the dead), for the home or a graveside visit. When families create an altar, they may add beer, tequila, coffee and/or various food dishes. After all, "the spirits of the dead are expected to pay a holiday visit home and should be provided with an enticing repast and adequate sustenance for the journey," according to Palfrey. Families remember the departed by telling stories about them.

While death is a topic largely avoided in the U.S., notes Palfrey, the remembrance of deceased ancestors and loved ones is traditional among diverse cultures around the globe, often marked by lighting candles or lamps and laying out offerings of food and drink. Such celebrations can be traced back as

far as the glory days of ancient Egypt when departed souls were honored during the great festivals of Osiris.

The Day of the Dead celebration has enjoyed a rise in popularity among the descendants of the early Mexicans who migrated north to the U.S., says the *Pasadena Weekly's* Theresa Moreau. She quotes multicultural specialist Ricardo Reyes as saying that the first Day of the Dead celebration in the U.S. took place in 1969 in San Francisco at the Galeria de la Raza, inspired by the Chicano civil-rights movement in the 1960s.

Moreau writes that "for many generations, this heart felt commemoration of the dead, this bridge between the many worlds of the Americas, has survived wars, borders, hatred and bloodshed for one purpose: to celebrate life."